Why Arab Cities Matter … 3

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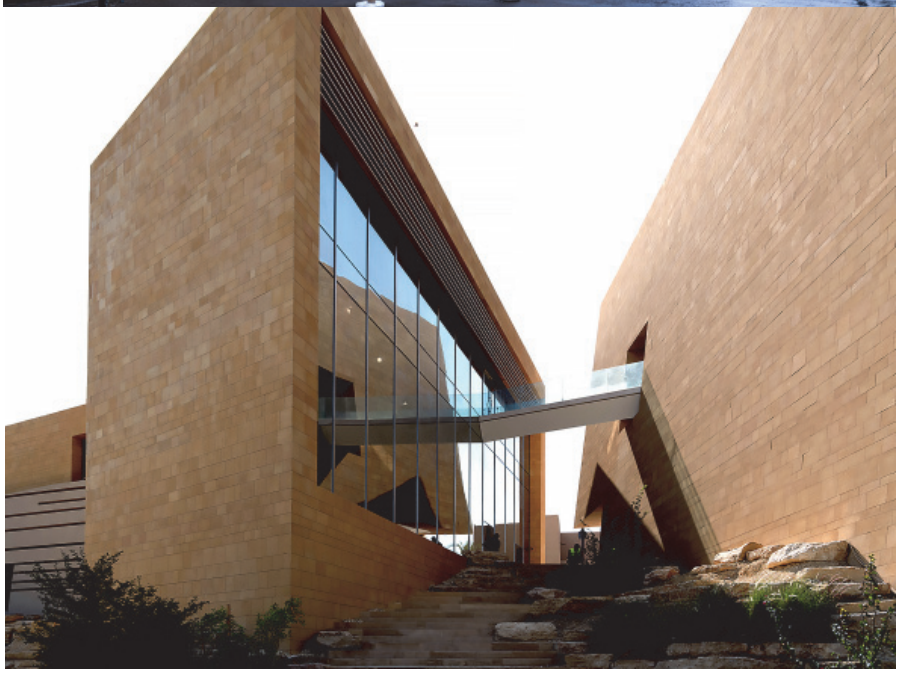
Rethinking Gulf Modernity: From Riyadh to Dubai (and Home Again)

In the Gulf, modernity does not creep in slowly – it rushes, accelerates, multiplies, and often overwhelms. Cities rise with astonishing speed, their skylines redrawn almost yearly, their ambitions calibrated to global visibility rather than local memory. And yet beneath the glass towers, engineered coastlines, and shimmering cultural districts lies a far more human, unresolved story about belonging, erasure, aspiration, and the fragile intimacies through which life is made liveable. In this blog I move through these layered geographies – from Riyadh's contested identity to Kuwait's embedded exclusions, from Doha's polished fictions to the backstage worlds of Abu Dhabi and Dubai – and return, unexpectedly, to a deeply personal space where architecture becomes a thread connecting generations. What emerges is not a narrative of Gulf exceptionalism, but one of parallel modernities shaped by power, migration, improvisation, and the quiet persistence of memory.

Riyadh is the place where this journey begins, unfolding through both the vast sweep of its transformation and the intimate sensation of personal return. Revisiting the city in 2019 after four decades felt disorienting: the Riyadh Water Tower of my childhood – once monumental – now seemed small, nearly swallowed by a skyline of corporate verticals; the desert edges where we used to picnic in the 1970s were replaced by superblocks, multilane highways, and the endless geometry of Doxiadis's grid. Yet fragments of familiarity lingered: a street corner, a scent of dust after rain, the stoic horizontality of old Najdi forms still visible in pockets of the city. Riyadh's evolution from a compact mud-walled town to the sprawling metropolis of Vision 2030 is not the linear story often told; it is instead a series of ruptures, negotiations, and appropriations. Imported planning models sit awkwardly beside Najdi traditions; grand state-led gestures coexist with improvised practices in alleys and courtyards; and modernity lands unevenly, with gleaming towers rising over neighbourhoods that hold entirely different rhythms of life. My wanderings through al-Marqab's tight alleyways, Batha's buzzing streets including its famed musical market, Shumaisi's traditional residential blocks, and the indeterminate expanse of Thumamah revealed another Riyadh – one rarely visible in renderings. In

Wadjda, the southern suburbs become a landscape of constraint and quiet rebellion, where mobility, gender, and the built environment intersect in ways masterplans never anticipate. These marginal spaces – where children race bicycles in empty lots, migrants gather behind unmarked storefronts, and families claim small pockets of shade – offer the city's most honest expression of modernity. They form a counterpoint to the monumental ambitions of Diriyah Gate, King Salman Park, the Financial District, or the vast new metro system. Riyadh's future depends on whether these overlooked spaces can be acknowledged not as obstacles to development but as reservoirs of cultural intelligence, resilience, and lived urbanism that no large-scale project can fully script.



East Futa District and Queens Tower, 2024 and Diriyah Art Futures (designed by Schiateralla Associati*), 2024.*

Kuwait's story unfolds along two intertwined paths: radical modernist ambition and profound social exclusion. Before oil, it was a fragile Gulf settlement shaped by monsoon winds, pearl diving, and courtyard houses adapted to heat and scarcity – an architecture of necessity rather than spectacle. The

Musical instruments market. Batha, 2024 and Thumamah picnic area, northern Riyadh, 2024.

post-oil modernist transformation, however, brought a dramatic reimagining: demolition of the historic core, commissioning of international planners, monumental ministries, rampant suburbanization, and iconic structures like the Kuwait Towers and Parliament. Kuwait's modernity was aspirational but also deeply political – an instrument for shaping citizenship, rewarding loyalty, and projecting sovereignty. And yet, Kuwait's modernism was never singular. It oscillated between the lyrical sensibilities of Saba Shiber – whose climate-responsive visions still resonate – and the stark pragmatism of ring roads, superblocks, and villa suburbs that redefined everyday sociability. The demolition and stigmatization of the al-Sawaber complex encapsulate this tension: an ambitious Arthur Erickson designed experiment in urban living reduced to ruin through neglect and political expediency. Running parallel to these architectural narratives is the quieter, more painful story of the Bidun and other marginalized residents whose lives expose the exclusions embedded in Kuwait's spatial and social order. Novels and films – *Bas Ya Bahr*, *The Bamboo*

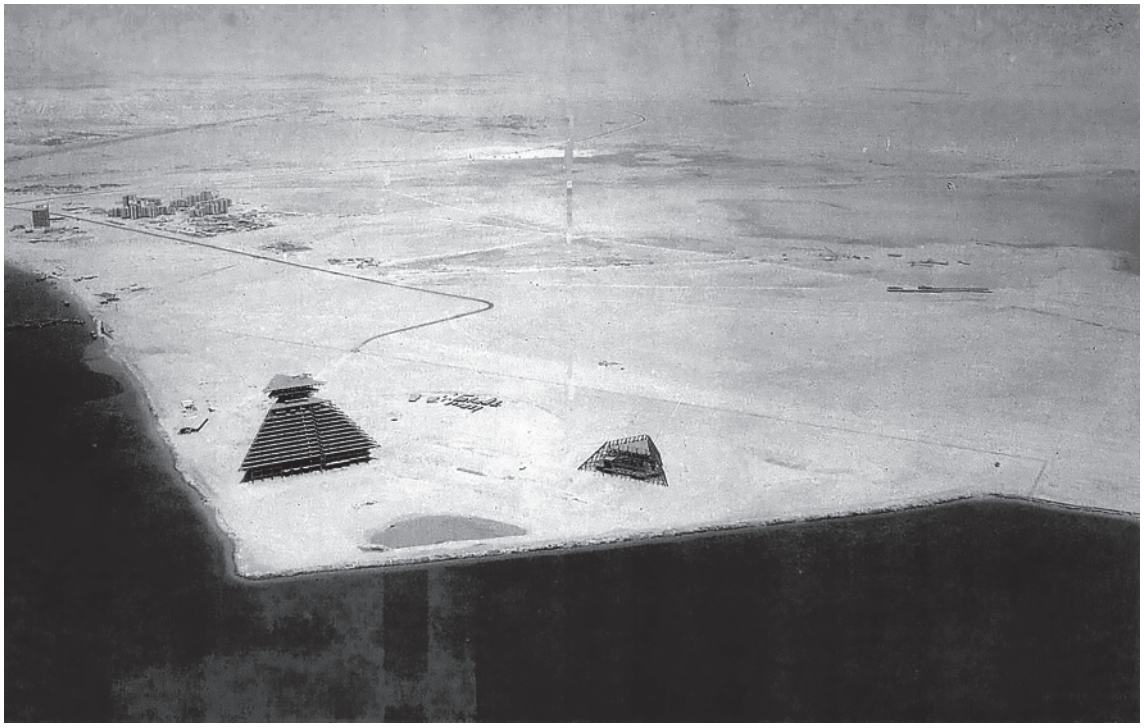
Kuwait villa, 1960s (Photo: © Ghazi Sultan*) and Kuwait Towers, 2007.*

Downtown Kuwait, 2007.

Stalk – and the haunting digital collages of artists like Dana Al Rashid reveal a city where belonging is unevenly distributed, where some neighbourhoods flourish while others dissolve into precarity. Yet the city also contains counter-currents of hope. The 'Secret Garden' in Salmiya – an informal, community-built space – embodies a different form of Kuwaiti urbanism: porous, inclusive, modest, and alive. It suggests that even in a city marked by exclusion, small gestures of care can open up new imaginaries for shared urban life.

In Doha, modernity is staged with theatrical clarity. It is a city that has mastered the art of performance, projecting itself outwards through iconic forms, carefully curated heritage, and spectacular infrastructure. But beneath the polished surfaces lies a palimpsest of erasure and reinvention. Early state modernism swept away large portions of pre-oil Doha, including Rumailah and the government quarter, while later reconstructions such as Souq Waqif and Msheireb attempted to reassemble fragments of a past already lost. Msheireb, for all its exemplary urban design, stands in tension with the disappearance of 'old Msheireb' and the lives that once animated it. Souq Waqif is both simulacrum and gathering place: artificial in concept, yet unexpectedly authentic in use. Doha's architecture, from the Sheraton's pyramidal futurism to Nouvel's desert rose, performs Qatari identity on a global stage. But the city's true geography reveals a more unsettled landscape: Al-Najada's vanished

alleys, the shrinking used-items market, the remote labour camps of Industrial City, the precarious ecosystems of migrant life unfolding beyond the frame. Ethnographies and personal fieldwork show how these shadow geographies are steadily displaced by enclaves like The Pearl and Lusail – spaces of extreme visibility built atop extreme invisibility. The 2022 World Cup magnified these contradictions: colossal infrastructure built by workers whose stories remain largely unacknowledged. Yet alongside these structural tensions, Doha also



Sheraton Doha under construction, 1978.

Msheireb under construction, 2013.

Msheireb, 2024; Najada neighbourhood, 2013.

contains sparks of alternate possibility – Sophia Al-Maria's Gulf Futurism, artists reclaiming industrial sites like the Fire Station, migrants playing cricket in empty lots, and fleeting moments where community forms in the margins. Doha's challenge, I argue, is to move from architecture as branding to architecture as belonging – to imagine a future that honours memory rather than overwriting it.

In the UAE, Abu Dhabi and Dubai emerge not as two distinct cities but as parallel experiments in nation-building and spectacle. Rather than approaching them solely through iconic projects, I made sense of them through encounters that revealed the politics of visibility and erasure: being cautioned at a Harvard conference by a government representative that 'those who criticize Dubai will be proven wrong', or being told in 2016 to remove Um Ahmad's photograph from the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale which I curated, because she 'did not look Emirati'. These moments illuminate the

World Trade Centre roundabout, Dubai and Downtown Abu Dhabi, 2009.

tension between the cities' desire to project curated narratives and the messy, lived realities beneath them. Dubai's *tabula-rasa* development and Abu Dhabi's carefully calibrated technocracy may differ in tone, yet both produce architectures of spectacle matched by extensive backstage worlds: Baniyas Square's dense transnational marketplace, the counterfeit economies of Karama, the fragile geographies of Satwa and Ghubeiba, and the more distant labour ecosystems of Mussafah and 'Little Bangladesh'. These are the spaces where migrant lives create their own forms of belonging, where repetition and presence make place even in landscapes that deny formal recognition. But the UAE is not only a site of critique, it is also a place of surprising tenderness. In Abu Dhabi's Baniyas neighbourhood, Rashad's quiet insistence – 'this is your home too' – opened a window onto an urbanism built not on spectacle but on hospitality, intimacy, and quiet solidarity. Along Dubai Creek, where boats and birds trace rhythms older than the towers behind them, one finds an enduring continuity that resists erasure. These vignettes show that the Gulf's most meaningful urban futures may emerge not from its grandest plans, but from its overlooked, unplanned, deeply human spaces.

Rashad in his home in Sha'abiya Baniyas, Abu Dhabi, 2024.

I would like now to shift these recollections from cities to the intimate architecture of memory. Here I turn to my father, Hassan Elsheshtawy, whose life and work span Cairo, Zürich, Hannover, Riyadh, and Amman – an entire geography of modernism rendered through a single life. His trajectory from the disciplined modernism of ETH to the climate-attuned sensibility he developed in Saudi Arabia and Egypt becomes a quiet counter-narrative to the spectacle-driven urbanism of the Gulf. Through his projects – the Benha Sports Club, our Maadi house, the Fayed retreat, and his work across Saudi Arabia – can trace a form of modernism rooted in ethics, empathy, and cultural intelligence. His teaching, his drawings, and even our last conversation about

Mies van der Rohe vanish into something more expansive: an understanding that architecture is not merely a profession or ideology, but a way of caring for the world. Through him, the entire narrative folds inwards: cities are built not only by states and firms, but by individuals shaped by migration, memory, hope, and responsibility. His legacy – intellectual, emotional, ethical – becomes a reminder that the most enduring structures in our lives are not towers or megaprojects, but the values passed quietly from one generation to the next.

My father, Hassan Elsheshtawy,
next to his Graduation Project at the ETH, Zurich, 1968.

Our house in Maadi, Cairo, 1986
and sketch of an alleyway in old Riyadh by my father.

The Gulf's kaleidoscope of cities – spectacular, fragile, exclusionary, and resilient – stand in contrast with the more traditional urban centres explored previously. Taken together, these three blogs trace a wider arc of Arab modernity: from medinas and colonial boulevards to desert capitals and engineered waterfronts, from erasure to reinvention, from spectacle to the intimate geographies of everyday life. The series as a whole invites us all to see Arab cities not as anomalies or monoliths, but as complex, deeply human terrains where the past and future meet in unpredictable, illuminating ways.

Images without sources are either public domain or Yasser Elsheshtawy's own photos.